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Politics and Language in Early Renaissance Italy

The linguistic peculiarities of Renaissance Italy can be traced to the uniqueness of its Roman inheritance. The Empire had developed and diffused Latin, which was inherited by the Church, contributing to its authority. The latter was shared after the millennium by the lawyers and ideologists of the independent cities. But this confederated supremacy of Latin was challenged during the thirteenth century by communal populations, who sought acceptance for their vernaculars as forms of latino*. This belief stimulated the humanists' rediscovery of Augustan Latin, which challenged Church authority. As to* volgare*, its rivalry with humanist Latin, as the proper language for government and literature, ended by raising Florence's* toscano *to an international status upstaging the Church's Latin.*

Politique et langage dans la première Renaissance italienne

Les particularités linguistiques de l'Italie de la Renaissance s'expliquent par le caractère unique de son héritage romain. L'Empire avait développé et diffusé le latin, qui fut ensuite hérité par l'Église, contribuant à son autorité. Après le millénaire, celle-ci fut partagée par les juristes et les idéologues des cités indépendantes. Mais la suprématie du latin fut mise en cause au XIII^e^ siècle par les communes, qui cherchaient à justifier leurs vernaculaires comme formes de latino*. Cette conviction finit par stimuler la redécouverte du latin classique par les humanistes, mettant en cause l'autorité de l'Église. Quant au* volgare*, sa rivalité avec le latin humaniste comme langue du gouvernement et de la littérature finit par conférer au* toscano *de Florence un statut international qui relégua au second plan le latin d'Église.*

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The three principal functions of language interact, as in a trinity. The first function of a language is to articulate thought, even in an individual. But usually that is to serve a second function, the most obvious, communication. And by serving for communication it cannot help exercising a third function, external to it, which I call political. By binding together those who thus use it, language automatically excludes those who do not. It thereby adds to the countless factors which variegate societies, including in determining who has more authority, who less. In mild forms we recognize this daily when we judge people by their accents. But not all forms are mild: in the "Sicilian Vespers" of 1282, failure to pronounce a certain Sicilian word brought instant death.

This paper will address this third, political function of language at work in the early Italian Renaissance, a period to be understood as extending from the middle of the thirteenth century to just after 1500.

Politically, Italy was then distinguished from the rest of Europe by two peculiarities: the presence of Rome, and that of independent cities (or city-states; but cities had in some degree been that from the beginning, so the name is largely conventional).[1] Linguistically, Italy was marked off by another peculiarity: its uniquely strong relationship with Latin. I hope to show how these peculiarities, too, were interconnected, and in so doing solve two puzzles so familiar that we forget how puzzling they are. One is why Renaissance Italy, politically weak, should have set Europe's standard in language, not just in Latin but in the most prestigious of European vernaculars. The other is why, in a Renaissance which laid emphasis on classical Rome, it should have been Florence, not Rome, which took the lead in both Latin and vernacular developments.

1. François de Polignac, *La naissance de la cité grecque*, Paris, La Découverte, 1984, p. 41-92. I thank Professor Peter Hainsworth and Dr Carolinne White for commenting on a draft of this paper, of whose shortcomings they remain innocent. Benoît Grévin, *Le parchemin des cieux. Essai sur le Moyen Âge du langage*, Paris, Seuil, 2012, unfortunately came to my notice too late to profit in my preparing this paper, which I see as a microscopic "case-study" of a relationship which his panorama identifies across the Latin and Muslim worlds, between a *langue référentielle* and a *langue vulgaire*.

To solve these puzzles we must go back a bit, to the sixth century BC in fact.

Rome and Latin

Rome and the independent cities were then the same thing. Rome was just another independent city, except that its independence – cities have often used their own independence to reduce that of others – was eclipsed by subjection to an Etruscan confederation, then ruling most of northern and central Italy from cities across an area loosely equivalent to modern Tuscany. In or around 508 BC, in a burst of puritan outrage – immortalized in the Lucretia story –[2] Rome threw off Etruscan lordship and began replacing it. By the end of the third century BC, Rome ruled all Italy south of Rimini; by the end of the second, also northern Italy and the Tyrrhenean coast round to Spain; by the end of the first, the rest of the western European mainland including Gaul. And finally, by Hadrian's death, in AD 138, Rome ruled everything on land or sea from the Euphrates to the Tay.

Rome's first language is classified today as "archaic Latin". Scraps and inscriptions[3] confirm its origin as one of the Indo-European dialects spoken in its province, Latium, then an area rather smaller than modern Lazio. Latin naturally gained ground as Rome expanded. Rome's soldiers and judges used Latin, and those who dealt with them had to learn it. Latin simultaneously changed as it rose to its new responsibilities. Grammar and vocabulary had to articulate complex thoughts about morals and politics, and communicate them across thousands of miles. Rising languages commonly plunder older ones. In 168 BC Rome had conquered the Greek empire, its language famous for its classics, and a mass-produced version of which was now the *koiné* (common language) of the eastern Mediterranean. Bilingual Roman patricians therefore

2. Livy – interpreted thus by Jacques Heurgon, *La vie quotidienne des Étrusques*, Paris, Hachette, 1962, p. 100-3.

3. Jonathan G. F. Powell, "Bridging the Gulf of Time. Latin from 753 BC to AD 1993 and Beyond", Newcastle upon Tyne, 1984, p. 7-13. Pascale Bourgain, *Le latin médiéval*, Turnhout, Brépols, 2005, gives a summary history of Latin to the Renaissance, with bibliography.

quarried Greek to enrich Latin, patriotically disguising most of their plunder by coining Latin equivalents. In private writings Cicero often used Greek words, in public, rarely,[4] preferring to coin Latin equivalents. The originals of our "essence", "moral", and "quality" appear first in Cicero, all modelled on Greek words.[5] Lucretius and other poets were doing the same in culture by "downloading" Greek history and mythology. Some fourteen centuries later, at the other end of its long reign, Latin would suffer similar plunder at the hands of Italian.

Classical Rome gloried in its language as it did in its other excellences. Once Latin had reached its Ciceronian height, in the first century BC, measures were taken to protect it from impurities, inseparable from massive immigration, from far and near, in turn inseparable from conquest. Grammarians were employed to correct public speech. Augustus took a lead. Though not above using "popular" language himself he poured favours and farms on the writers we still exalt as "Augustan", and made good Latin a condition of successful petitions. Once he dismissed a legate for writing *ixi* instead of *ipsi*.[6]

As Rome's courts and garrisons spread over the Empire, so did Latin. More meant worse. Upstarts like Diocletian (285-305) were too busy defending the Empire to have will or capacity to police a *koiné* now spoken in some form by millions. Although some marginalised nobles shored up their status by cultivating high linguistic standards[7] others obeyed other preoccupations. Christianity shrank from Ciceronian grandeur and adapted Latin for its own service, for instance giving old words new meanings, like *saeculum, militia, fides, ratio*,[8] and many more.

Shortly before 400, St Jerome translated Greek and Hebrew scriptures into Latin, adding magisterially to their so-called *vulgata*

4. Marcello Durante, *Dal latino all' italiano moderno*. Bologna, Zanichelli, 1981, p. 10.

5. Elizabeth Rawson, *Cicero*. London, Bristol Classical Press, 1983, p. 232.

6. Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC – AD 337)*, London, Duckworth, 1977, p. 216; generally on emperors and language, p. 203-240. For the *ixi* episode: Suetonius, *Augustus*, c. 88.

7. Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 17-64.

8. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 59, has a list. For *ratio*, see the speculations in the article "Raison", *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, Paris, Fayard, 1999, p. 936-939.

Latin versions. Precisely how many of the *vulgus* could at that date have understood these versions has teased generations of scholars. How many of the late Roman population could understand Latin, let alone read it? A precise answer to the question is impossible for two reasons in combination. One is the paucity of evidence about the speech of the Empire's illiterate majority; the other, a conceptual problem in interpreting what evidence there is. Languages usually exist in several "registers". A written register, if any, is usually alone at the top (though there can be more than one), the others ranging down *ad infinitum.* They pose the question when a difference in register constitutes a difference in language. That the problem is a real one is proved by there being in the world today at least three dialects called *ladino*, comprehensible neither to each other nor to scholars only knowing Latin. These two problems together explain why experts can give very different dates for the birth of a "romance" language – distinct, that is, from Jerome's Latin. Dates range from the first century BC[9] to the second AD.[10]

A moment's thought may help us decide between them. A complex society puts a tension between the first two of the functions I have just assigned to language. The better a language articulates thought, in one sphere – like ruling (or, today, computers) – the less it will communicate away from that sphere. This favours the earlier date. Just when Latin was reaching its highest sophistication, in the first century BC, that is to say, Rome's illiterate would have brought into semi-independent existence, for their own purposes, their own linguistic "register". Unwritten, it would be exposed to the kind of influence which had shaped unwritten languages for thousands of years, for instance the roles of women (in Rome, mostly illiterate), as first teachers of a "mother-tongue", and of immigration and slavery, with their own repertoires of linguistic effect.[11]

This independence was only "semi-" because proper Latin was there, above and around it, at first as a different register and in time a different language. "Romance" Latin would thus be related

9. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 22.

10. Alfredo Schiaffini, "Problemi del passaggio dal latino all 'italiano'", *Studi in onore di Angelo Monteverdi*, vol. 2, ed. Giuseppina Gerardi Marcuzzo, Modena, Società tip. editrice modenese, 1969, p. 691-715, on p. 703.

11. See Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, London, Allen Lane, 1994, p. 25-52.

to written Latin, but not as child to parent, rather as cousin to cousin, both descended from archaic Latin but following different fortunes, each identity protected by its own hierarchy of priorities (articulation; communication), each "plundering" the other as it chose and for its own purposes. Two examples will illustrate this, one in each direction. Seventh-century Italian notarial documents are in Latin (scarcely recognizable as that, probably learned "on the job", but unquestionably Latin), while importing *volgare* words for objects without Latin names – e.g. a new kind of plough.[12] In the other direction, Christianity, having moulded Latin to its own use, showered the results on *volgare* speakers by preaching, leaving Italian (to stick with that) words like *compassione*, *avarizia,* and *grazia*.[13]

Latin remained a written language (in the West the only one), *volgare* unwritten. So they necessarily reacted in different ways when the Empire began to break up. Unwritten language will naturally diversify geographically, among regions which break away. This happened.[14] A written language will respond differently, its privileges – relative constancy and universality – paid for by subjection to the fortunes of its writers, and the institutions and professions which train and support them. The reading of late- and post-Roman Latin is in this like geology. Its surface peculiarities reflect conditions far below and largely invisible, conditions which include, luckily, almost the only direct hints we possess of the *un*written language.

The Empire began to disintegrate in the late second century, did so more decisively in the late third, and drastically in the late fourth. The uniqueness of Renaissance Italy's relationship with Latin, spoken and written, dates from this period. Before Germanic invaders came to complicate the picture in the fifth century, the changes surmisable in spoken, *volgare* Latin suggest a regression towards the languages spoken in regions before Rome subjected them: in the East, Greek;[15] in southern Gaul and north-western Italy ("Cisalpine Gaul"), Celtic;[16] and in most of the rest of Italy, Oscan

12. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 92-93.
13. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 95.
14. Details in Walther von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung der romanischen Sprachräume*, Bern, A. Francke Ag. Verlag ("Bibliotheca Romanica", 8), 1950.
15. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 71-72.
16. W. von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung*, p. 34-75.

and Umbrian.[17] Because these last two languages were themselves cousins to Latin, their speakers would have found Latin easier to learn as Rome expanded, and, six or seven centuries later, harder to forget as Rome contracted. Nor would they have been eager to forget it, knowing that the "Roman" Empire had actually been an Italian Empire, Latin Italy's language.

A consciousness of this kind may find witness in the Trecento, when evidence at last became abundant. *Latino* was the normal name for any Italian dialect if it needed distinguishing from a language from outside the peninsula (like Arabic, French, or German).[18] Domestically, a distinction was only made between *grammatica* (proper Latin) and *volgare* (the rest). There were fissures in this nomenclature, but they only opened up seriously in the fifteenth century, as humanist Latin stood on its dignity and a national vernacular came in sight. There is no reason to think that the usage was not ancient. Rather the opposite. When the earliest shreds of relevant evidence appear, in the tenth century, we find one north-Italian cleric remark on how "close" (*vicina*) his and his correspondent's spoken language is to Latin,[19] and another assume the homogeneity of all Italian spoken language from Lombardy to Apulia.[20]

In this context, Tuscan is a special case. Etruscan had belonged to a different family from italic dialects, being not even Indo-European.[21] The defeated Etruscans had had to learn Latin from scratch. Centuries later, much the same would apply to Irish,

17. W. von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung*, p. 5-19.

18. To the examples given in Salvatore Battaglia's *Grande Dizionario della lingua italiana*, VIII, Torino, Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1973, p. 810-813, §6 (also §5, 6, and 17, where Battaglia's compilers seem to miss this meaning), should be added Franco Sacchetti, *Trecentonovelle*, n° 78, §2 (where a German immigrant curses *quando in latino e quando in Tedesco*), and Massimo Zaggia, *Ovidio, Heroides: Volgarizzamento Fiorentino Trecentesco di Filippo Ceffi*, I, Florence, SISMEL, 2009, p. 27 (where a 1323 manuscript announces Livy as "recato di francesco in latino"). As the dates of Battaglia's examples approach 1500 it will be noticed that the terminology changes.

19. A. Schiaffini, "Problemi del passaggio", p. 709 ("Gonzone" to Atto of Vercelli).

20. Liutprand of Cremona, *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, c. 7. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 81, plays down the significance of Liutprand's remark, but in the irrelevant context of a *consciousness* of Italian unity; Liutprand would have sunk his case if its *linguistic* veracity had not been axiomatic.

21. J. Heurgon, *La vie quotidienne*, p. 27-30.

Anglo-Saxon, and even some Frankish scholars, learning Latin from their non-italic (though Indo-European) base-language. The Etruscans had a steeper learning-curve; and after surmounting it, forgot an old language which no one else now used, clinging only, in speech, because they had no reason to drop it, to the "aspirated guttural" sound which dialect-experts agree survives in Tuscan dialects (saying for instance *hasa* for *casa*).[22] As Rome's power waned, and other Italians revived traits of their ancestral languages, the Tuscans alone had no language of their own left to fall back on. They could only stick more closely to the Latin their forbears had laboriously learned.[23] This reconstructed history must underlie the two best-recognized peculiarities of medieval Tuscan dialect, relative closeness to Latin, and conservatism.[24] And these, in turn, surely played a part in the primacy Tuscan acquired among Renaissance dialects.

The relative homogeneity of late-Roman Italian dialects gave them a resilience which withstood the Germanic invasions from the late fifth century. Goths would rule Italy for half a century, the Lombards for another two, and both had arrived with their own Germanic languages, and a hostility to Latin culture.[25] The Goths had some slight influence on Italian language, the Lombards more. Settling most densely in "Lombardy" but colonizing as far south as Benevento, the Lombards would give hundreds of new words to Italian (*banca*, not inappropriately, began as Lombard for "bench"), together with some sound-changes – inevitable when adults learn a language, sounds being then harder to learn than words.[26] In both cases, however, it was the invaders' languages which influenced *latino*, not the other way round.

This effect is put in relief by contrast with Gaul. Gaul had been homeland to some of early Rome's fiercest enemies. Caesar completed its conquest only in 60 BC, with notorious difficulty. Romans planted towns, whose judges and soldiers radiated Latin,

22. J. Heurgon, *La vie quotidienne*, p. 303; W. von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung*, p. 6-8 (and Karte 2); M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 87.

23. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 87.

24. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 146-147.

25. For Goths, see Procopius, *Wars,* v. 26.17 (modifying M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 89).

26. W. von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung*, p. 106, 146.

impinging from above on the native Celtic languages. But by the fourth century, Roman rule was crumbling, leaving by then only bishops to continue the radiation. By mere head-count, of free and unfree, throughout fifth-century Gaul, it is still doubtful if speakers of any kind of Latin formed more than a minority. They would be a smaller one still after the Salian Franks' arrived in the 470s. Compared with the Germanic invaders of Italy, the Salians were quicker in coming to terms politically and religiously with the *romanitas* of their new lands, but linguistically they were slower. Franks equivocated. The eastern ones on the Moselle began by accepting the language they found but later settled for German.[27] The Salians, in the West, did almost the opposite. Their leaders had to be bilingual from the beginning in order to qualify for Roman office; and it must have been they who began the flow of Germanic words and sounds into the earliest "French".[28] But the rest largely stuck with German. More than three centuries after Clovis, in 813, a Church council in Tours said that Christian fundamentals must be preached to all social classes "in the rustic Roman tongue or in German".[29] That term, *romana lingua*, found in other ninth-century documents,[30] was new, after a discovery by bookish monks that the *volgare* Latin spoken by some people round them was not proper Latin. The term betrays also a Germanic background. Franks thought in terms of tribes, not regions (like Latium). They named the ex-Latin *volgare* after the "tribe" of "the Romans" who spoke it.[31]

I have dealt first with Latin's unwritten *volgare* on the nursery principle of taking the hardest thing first. But Italy's bond with

27. Rudolf Ernst Keller, "The language of the Franks", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,* 67 (1964), p. 101-102, esp. p. 107, 113.

28. W. von Wartburg, *Die Ausgliederung*, p. 85, 101-102.

29. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Concilia aevi Karolini,* I (1) [1906], ed. Albert Werminghoff, Hannover, Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1997, p. 288.28-9, §38. Michel Banniard, *Viva voce. Communication écrite et communication orale du IV^e^ au IX^e^ siècle en Occident latin*, Paris, Institut des Études Augustiniennes, 1992, p. 393-420, argues that *theodiscam* in this clause is formulaic. This is not the place to air my disagreement. We skate on thin ice.

30. See A. Schiaffini, "Problemi del passaggio", p. 707.

31. Eugen Ewig, "Volkstum und Volksbewusstsein im Frankenreiche des 7ten Jhs.", *Caratteri del secolo VII in occidente*, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo ("Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano dei Studi sull'Alto Medioevo", 5), Spoleto, Presso la Sede del Centro, 1958, p. 587-648, esp. 611-614.

Latin was quite as close in the written language. The whole idea of "vulgarizing" the Bible may have had an element in it of wishful thinking. But faith feeds on wishful thinking. As the Empire crumbled, it was to be increasingly Christianity that kept written Latin alive. (Question: would the language in which Marsilius of Padua wrote *Defensor pacis* have existed but for the Church it attacked?). Administratively, Christianity meant bishops; and Italy – with all those towns – had far more bishops per square kilometre than anywhere else in Europe. More might mean worse, here too, and many Italian bishoprics – with their Latin, to judge from the little we know of it – took a battering from the Lombards. But some remained; and in one bishopric, above all, Latin was as safe as early medieval Europe could make it. For all its plagues and sackings, Rome remained by far the largest city in western Europe, and in so far as anyone ruled it, it was its bishop, his primacy in the Church – hence his communication-network – ratcheting up with every imperial crisis. Papal Latin, stout enough to feed both the Northumbrian and Frankish renaissances, would take its severest dip in the tenth century; but only to rise to new heights in the late eleventh.[32]

By then the "commercial revolution" had begun, and by inflating the Italian cities it inaugurated a slow erosion in the status of bishops. But not in Latin, because the main sources of that erosion, Roman law and republicanism, themselves fed on a Latin of even purer vintage than that of the bishops. Justinian's codifications of classical as well as late Roman law engendered many times their volume in Latin commentary. Republicanism, when it rose above the surface (with Brunetto Latini), looked straight back to the Latin of Cicero. For the present purpose I defined the early Italian Renaissance as beginning in the middle of the thirteenth century. Then, in Italian cities, users of these three strands of Latin still largely co-operated. Their language duly bound them together and excluded everyone else, fortifying an authority which might otherwise have been precarious. An orator summed the position up in 1243, when congratulating a new *podestà* of Genoa. Flattering

32. Dietrich Lohrmann, *Das Register Papst Johannes VIII. (872-882). Neue Studien Zur Abschrift Reg. Vat. I, Zum Verlorenen Originalregister Und Zum Diktat Der Briefe*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1968, for the dip and first signs of recovery; for some eccentric papal Latin, see p. 267.

the assembled functionaries as *litterati* (the word before *c*. 1350 meant "able to read and write Latin"),[33] he went on: "Well may the non-*litterati* say of you, without you we could do nothing".[34]

La questione della lingua

Even as the orator spoke, the status of Latin was nevertheless under challenge. Latin was part of Italy's inherited wealth. Like all such, it could prove a hindrance as well as a blessing. In one particular, it had already been a hindrance. Literary historians have wondered at the tardiness of medieval Italy's serious production of literature, whether in proper Latin or *volgare.* Imputing motives is hazardous. But from the effects, at least, it seems as if the heirs of *latino* thought it unnecessary or even presumptuous to add to the classics. This literary inertia is nowhere better demonstrated than by Italians' early enthusiasm for literature from France, either in the "neo-Latin" poetry emanating from France's "twelfth-century renaissance", or in the epics or love-poems sung in the respective vernaculars of the *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc.*

It took some three generations before Italy woke up to claim its inheritance. Ronald Witt's recent re-dating of the birth of Italian humanism – a deliberate revival of Augustan Latin – tells how its first pioneer, the Paduan Lovato de' Lovati, was stung to action around 1290 after hearing what he called the "barbarous bellowing" of a public performer of French epic,[35] and how humanism mushroomed from there. Written *volgare* poetry had begun earlier in the century and proved equally explosive. Where other European vernaculars had had poetry from the millennium or earlier, and Italy next-to-none before the 1220s, in little over a century Italian *volgare* poetry had produced Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, sending an influence into other European vernaculars greater than any which any of them

33. Herbert Grundmann, "*Litteratus-illiteratus*: der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter", *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 40 (1958), p. 1-63.

34. Albertanus Brixiensis, *Sermone inedito*, ed. L. F. Fè, Brescia, 1874, p. 46. See also Enrico Artifoni, "Sull'eloquenza politica nel Duecento italiano", *Quaderni medievali*, 35 (1993), p. 57-78, esp. p. 77.

35. Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, Boston-Leiden, Brill, 2003, p. 52-53; generally, p. 31-173.

would send into any other. As in humanism, so in *volgare* poetry, Latin tradition was a prime cause. The *volgare* slave had broken free, and all the freer through knowing where the keys were. This is not pure fancy. *Vernaculus* had actually meant "slave", especially a domestic slave, especially one born in his master's household and (perhaps) from his loins. Italy's *volgare* stood to proper Latin like that. It had had the privilege of bearing its master's name, but the constraint of slave-status; then, once freed, it could plunder riches not only from its former master – Dante's *Comedy* is only the most dazzling of many examples –[36] but it also plundered its slightly-older equals, the Provençaux. A Vatican codex made in Tuscany around 1300 contains nearly a thousand Italian vernacular poems, by a hundred poets.[37]

By 1300, Italy's literature was thus up and running in both languages. To judge again only from effects, it seems as if Italy's competitive spirit, provoked earlier by France, was now internalized into a contest between Italy's two forms of *latino* as to their respective merits as vehicles for fine writing. From Dante's early musings, around 1295, the contest would continue to the early sixteenth century, and in the middle of the fifteenth it acquired a name, *la questione della lingua*.[38] The attention to the *questione della lingua*, then and now, will strike fresh arrivals as obsessive, a case of linguistic "navel-gazing". But it was no more than a necessary consequence of all before it, and would in time bear exceptionally rich fruit. No one, after all, could expect Italy's own paternal legacy, Latin, to give up its sovereignty without fighting to its last breath, especially since there was no princely referee to settle the contest before it had run its course.

The fruit was rich in both languages. The final winner, the vernacular, reaped its fruit in two forms. Because the debate had been conducted by and for an oligarchic class spread through

36. Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 2-40, compares the *Comedy* in this respect to Lucretius' *De natura rerum*, which had "plundered" Greek culture.

37. For the facts and sources: Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante. Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, esp. p. 125-144.

38. Bruno Migliorini, "La questione della lingua", *Problemi ed orientamenti critici di lingua e di letteratura italiana*, Milan, Marzorati, 1949, 1-75. For Latin *v.* vernacular defined as the first of two "questioni", see p. 1.

many cities, not for one prince, those qualified to judge find that the birth of a generally-accepted vernacular proved smoother and more stable than those beyond the Alps.[39] Secondly, the enduring dialectic between *volgare* and Latin had honed the former into a high-quality language, with status far exceeding Italy's political power. Sixteenth-century diplomats would expect Italian to be understood in all major European countries and in the Turkish empire.[40] Only England was excepted – which may be why Queen Elizabeth took the pains to learn it.

In the two-centuries of debate, the pendulum had swung both ways, each swing lasting about half a century. Dante's lifetime (1265-1321) had seen a climax in the explosion of vernacular poetry, the dignity of whose language Dante defended in both theory and practice. Prose and poetry in *volgare*, especially Tuscan, including *volgare* versions of Latin classics (at first translated from *French*) found a wide and wealthy readership for a generation after Dante's death.[41]

As if thus provoked, Latin then raced ahead to recover its lead. Starting just before Petrarch's birth, the first heyday of humanism roughly covered his lifetime (1304-74). Petrarch himself was nevertheless a secret "double agent": as awestruck by Dante as everyone else, he privately perfected *volgare* poems destined to be exemplars for all other European poets, even while pretending to be ashamed of them, confident in the knowledge that his prodigious fame depended on his Latin writings. The vogue for classical translations gave way to a demand for the Latin originals. Even Boccaccio, the great vernacular story-teller and another Dante devotee, thought the *Comedy* would really have been more dignified in Latin.[42] Around 1400, a certain Matteo Ronto duly made an honest poem of the *Comedy* by putting it in Latin hexameters. Dante's enthusiasts were

39. Giacomo Devoto, *The Languages of Italy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 231.

40. Garrett Mattingley, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, London, Cape, 1963, p. 217; B. Migliorini, "La questione", p. 6; B. Migliorini, "Latino e volgare nel '400", *Lettere Italiane,* 6 (1954), p. 321-335, on p. 333-334.

41. For translations, see R. G. Witt, *In the Footsteps*, p. 176-193. In detail: M. Zaggia, *Ovidio, Heroides*, p. 3-48 (*c.* 1350 as cut-off point, p. 3-4, 8-9).

42. "Molto più artificioso e sublimo, perciò che molto più arte è nel parlare latino che nel moderno", according to B. Migliorini, "La questione", p. 2, ostensibly quoting Boccaccio's *Comento*, lezione III, though I have been unable to find the words there.

left only with the embarrassment that his Latin did not meet the new standards.

In the early fifteenth century the pendulum swung back. The main *volgare* champion this time was Leon Battista Alberti, whose authority, like Petrarch's, was exalted by the excellence of his Latin writings. But now Alberti defended *volgare*. Petrarch had once said loftily that he wrote for the discerning few. Alberti – his very faintly revolutionary note may remind some readers of Shelley – boasted that he wrote for the "many". Alberti was the main instigator of a "trial" staged in Florence in 1441, whose judges were to assess the relative qualities of love poetry in Latin and the vernacular.[43] The fact that they withheld judgement may reflect a consciousness of the high feelings the question aroused. It did. After it was over, in 1531, a humanist who foresaw the imminent demise of Latin confessed, eirenically, that his only regret was that the issue had divided people.[44]

Hidden behind the debate, but amply attested in government and business proceedings, was the growing strength of Alberti's "many". Most citizens had no professional imperative to learn Latin. They were happy to cultivate and learn to write their everyday language; and it was their preferences, however ill-represented in the literary sources, which gave tectonic force to the case for *volgare*, and fuelled the high feelings. What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body? Something approaching this happened between *volgare* and Latin. The result was an exploration, of a thoroughness paralleled nowhere else, of the functions required of a language.

To itemize all these would need at least another paper.[45] But at bottom, implicitly, the debate was between the claims of the two first functions of language I identified at the start. Classical Latin, with its cases, inflexions, tenses, voices, and moods, allowed finer thinking than any western rival. Ronald Witt's study of early humanism has

43. Martin McLaughlin, "Leon Battista Alberti and the redirection of Renaissance humanism", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 167, 2009 Lectures, ed. Ron Johnston, FBA, London, Oxford University Press-British Academy, 2011, p. 25-59; Alberti and the "many", p. 47-48; see also B. Migliorini, "Latino e volgare", p. 332-333.

44. B. Migliorini, "La questione", p. 4.

45. Some are reviewed by B. Migliorini, "La questione", p. 6-9.

again put this well, with special reference to the conceptualization of time and space. Thus apropos of time, he observes how the Paduan historian Mussato (1261-1329), having pored on the best Roman historians, had absorbed a Latin which enabled him to examine, with a finer focus than any post-classical historian, "the discrete moments that, taken serially, made up events that might otherwise have seemed monolithic and inaccessible to constructive scrutiny".[46] Ultimately, the claim for Latin was thus not a matter of ornament or rhetoric, less still of snobbery or conservatism – though these might occasionally trespass into it. The claim rested on the greater precision of good Latin in representing the world's complexities.

Language had also to communicate, however; and this was where Latin had problems. Its champions rightly proclaimed its capacity to carry communication far through time and space: from the past (they meant the classical past, not "scholastics") and forward into the future (one Latin-champion said *volgare* changed so fast that it served only for things "we do not want to pass on to our successors").[47] At any one moment Latin also joined people of distant nations and regions. It had long done that in science, would shortly do the same in the universalism of Erasmus and More. It had already, before then, done the same on a miniature scale within Italy, with a paradoxical result. An inter-regional sodality of *Latin* writers, in the mid-Quattrocento, proved the necessary antecedent for the formation of a shared *Italian* language.[48]

But the communication which decided the debate in the end was communication with Alberti's "many", ever-present, mostly ignorant of Latin and with little time or intent to learn it. Here, too, the Church played a part, because preaching was in theory meant to reach everyone, without even their asking for it; therefore in a common language. St Bernardino of Siena was only the most famous, as he was by far the best-recorded, of preachers who embodied this principle, taking pride in his ear for local dialect, and teasing preachers who could not or would not use it.[49] Preachers did

46. R. G. Witt, *In the Footsteps*, p. 172.

47. G. Devoto, *The Languages*, p. 237: "quod nolumus transferre ad posteros" (Francesco Filelfo).

48. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 148.

49. *Le prediche volgari*, ed. Piero Bargellini, Milan, Rizzoli, 1936, p. 505

not run city governments, however; and it was tougher demands which forced political change. Back in Genoa in 1243, town- and guild-statutes had been in Latin. That was because everyone who mattered understood them and their subjects did not. In the course of the fourteenth century, in Italy as elsewhere in Europe, Latin statutes of this kind were replaced by vernacular: in Siena, in 1309-10; in Perugia, in 1342; in Ascoli, in 1377, and so on. The dates give the shell of the story, but hide the motives. These are usually guesswork, but sometimes more than that. Under guild pressure, in 1414, the Florentine *Signoria* ruled that commercial legal proceedings were henceforth to be recorded in *volgare*. Nothing special in that. It is the sanctions that are revealing. Any notary who thenceforth drew up a document in Latin would not only invalidate the document but be fined a thousand pounds.[50] A thousand pounds. A year's salary. Poor notaries. They had lived by Latin, and helped keep it alive since Roman times. Poor lawyers as such. When the contest was over, it is a lawyer we still hear trumpeting on about the qualities of Latin – except (lawyers learn when to keep quiet) the one he may have cared for most, the protection it gave to his fees.[51]

The political function of language had therefore underlain the *questione della lingua* from start to finish. But actually it did not finish, and never can. The tensions innate in all language had fired the debate, and survived in their new format. In Dante's time, as before and even after him, v*olgare* had been convicted for its crudity: it could not express fine ideas. In the *questione*, its defender replied that Greek and Latin had once been crude but had improved, and *volgare* could do the same. It did, ending by achieving – in Lorenzo de' Medici's circle – a superfine language that has been called a *umanesimo volgare.* But that ran into the same difficulties as humanist Latin. For most practical purposes it had been "kicked upstairs", and demonstrated, by its fate, that the dialectic in the *questione della lingua* is one innate in language.

(Sermon 23); *Prediche volgari sul campo di Siena, 1427*, I, ed. Carlo Delcorno, Milan, Rusconi, 1989, p. 76-77.

50. B. Migliorini, "Latino e volgare", p. 324-325.

51. B. Migliorini, "La questione", p. 3-4 (Romolo Amaseo, 1529).

Florence and *Toscano*

During the long debate, one type of *volgare* had increasingly gained ground, adapting and identifying itself as it did so until it became a *koiné* for all Italians with any degree of education. Its name was at first usually *toscano*, though sometimes – after the conquest of Pisa in 1408 Florence was ever more securely in control of Tuscany – *fiorentino*. The two were not identical because Florentines had made their own refinements. But the differences were not obvious in non-Tuscan regions with their own historic dialects. So the terms were often used interchangeably, both to give way after 1500, increasingly though not exclusively, to *italiano*. By then neither name was anyway quite what it implied, non-Tuscan adjustments having entered *toscano* as it rose in rank.

On a literary level the triumph of *toscano* is easy to explain. Its pre-eminent paragons, Dante and Petrarch, Tuscan-born, had spent much of their later lives being lionized in northern Italy. Despite challenges – strongest from the Veneto – their "literary Tuscan" ended as the ambitious poet's language of preference. Its evolution is easily charted from literary texts. How far it related to everyday written and spoken language is another question. Commercial and government communication played as big or a bigger part in the drift towards *toscano*; and here was yet another paradox. The heyday of Florentine commerce and literature had been in the Trecento but it was in the Quattrocento that *toscano* upstaged other vernaculars.

Many of the reasons for this conquest had little to do with Florence in particular, but one did. Over two centuries, writers and readers of Florence's literature had refined *fiorentino* as an instrument for saying what the top businessmen-cum-politicians of Italian cities most needed to say. Like Augustan Latin – of which it may have begun with a lingering memory – *toscano* rose to new responsibilities, and was recognized for meeting them. Thus Ludovico Sforza, who had no special reason to flatter Florence, held *fiorentino* the best of Italian dialects, and when appointing a court poet in 1495 chose a Florentine, so that, he said, the poet's "elegant Florentine speech, and the apt and well-contrived neatness of his verse, will give our city an opportunity to bring more polish

and smoothness to its own, rather raw, manner of speaking".[52] In the 1530s it was to be a Venetian patrician, Pietro Bembo, whose best-selling Italian grammar cemented the supremacy of Dante's and Petrarch's language.

But the innate quality of *toscano* was only one reason for its diffusion. Others lay in external circumstance. Although fragmentation weakened Italy externally, internally it raised the premium on inter-government communication, by letter and personal diplomacy. Both clamoured not only for a *koiné*, but for one of high precision. In Machiavellian Italy, misunderstandings could be costly. From the 1430s onwards, a *corps* of patrician diplomats progressively refined *toscano* to a point where, after 1500, it got a name of its own as *cortigiano.* Before *cortigiano*, in its turn, was "kicked upstairs" by satirists as being too fastidious for general use, it had bequeathed to modern Italian the everyday titles of *Signore* and *Signora*, and the third-person *Lei* and *Loro* to mean "you". A more material factor was printing. Despite its dispersed production (Venice in the lead), printing favoured a standardization which could only favour Tuscan. More decisive still was a flurry of grammars, some twenty published between 1515 and 1550. After the twists and turns which *toscano* had already undergone, grammars gave it not just an orthodoxy, but one which gave precedence to the language of the best *toscano* writers of prose and verse. This is because grammars normally quarry the best writing for examples. It had been this use of Augustan writing, in medieval Latin grammars, which had sparked humanist interest in it.[53] Now Bembo's grammar in particular did the same for *toscano*'s golden age, the fourteenth century.[54] At last, *volgare* had become *grammatica*.

Machiavelli resented the nationalization of his city's language. But he could do nothing about it, and most Florentines would have disagreed. Patriotic pride in language is a diplomat's business, but he has to hide it. Despite their mastery of many languages,

52. "La nazione fiorentina nel dire e nello scrivere volgare passa tutti gli altri"; "per l'ornato fiorentino parlare di costui e per le argute, terse et prompte sue rime la città nostra venesse a limare e polire il suo alquanto rozo parlare". Quoted by B. Migliorini*, The Italian Language,* abridged and recast by T. Gwynfor Griffith, from Italian edition, *Storia della lingua italiana* [Florence, Sansoni, 1960], London, Faber 1966/84, p. 157.

53. R. G. Witt, *In the Footsteps*, p. 31-36.

54. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 158-159.

Renaissance diplomats could be recommended to prefer their own because it boosted national prestige.[55] Pricked pride could equally affect language. Corrections in one Siena manuscript show a deliberate resistance to the merging of Siena's form of *toscano* with that of its over-triumphant neighbour.[56] Even popes were not above this sentiment. John XXII had once demanded a Latin translation of a letter sent in French from the Paris royal chancery. The septuagenarian ex-heavyweight from the Angevin kingdom of Naples was surely pretending not to read French, to hide the irritation of "Jacques de Cahors" at the unstoppable triumphalism of the northern French.[57] A similar motive may have moved Petrarch to choose Latin in 1361, when he spoke in Paris on Milanese behalf, on the excuse that French was a language "I do not know and cannot easily learn"[58] – this, when a vogue for talking French was taking such a hold among Italian nobles that Benvenuto da Imola felt goaded to snort that French was a *bastard* language.[59]

There has to be guesswork here. But one guess as good as others attends a reminiscence by Vespasiano da Bisticci, the gregarious Florentine bookseller, about a conversation he had in 1460 with an Aragonese envoy he knew. The envoy came to Florence and called first on Vespasiano, who asked what his mission was and learned that it was to win Florentine support for an Aragonese claim to Naples. "What language will you speak in?", asked Vespasiano, as if the matter might be in doubt. The envoy replied, as if surprised by the question, that he had "written it in Latin". The bookseller said "there are few people who know Latin", and told his friend that his cause "would have more chance of success in *volgare*". The envoy paused. After a moment's thought he took what was clearly the prudent course, and when he arrived at the *Signoria* he put the

55. G. Mattingley, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, p. 218 (De Vera); Vladimir E. Hrabar, *De legatis et legationibus tractatus varii*, Dorpat, Mattiesen, 1906, p. 193 (Kirchner, *c*. 1600), c. 7: "qui vero linguam externam assumemus? Cum majus ex linguae alterius usurpatione subjectionis indicium …".

56. M. Durante, *Dal latino*, p. 164.

57. Bernard Guillemain, *La cour pontificale d'Avignon, 1309-1376. Étude d'une société*, Paris, De Boccard, 1966 [2nd edn.], p. 151.

58. B. Migliorini, *The Italian Language,* p. 133: "linguam gallicam nec scio nec facile possum scire".

59. *Comentum super … Dantis Comoediam*, II, ed. S. P. Lacaita, Florence, Barbèra, 1887, p. 409: "lingua gallica est bastarda linguae latinae, sicut experientia docet".

case in *volgare* so elegantly (Vespasiano recalls) that he won high praise and approval not merely for his wisdom but for "his manner of speaking, being a non-Italian".[60]

The message was getting through. Not just notaries, foreigners, too, had to use the up-and-coming language. Not *big* foreigners: when Charles VIII came to Italy with an army in 1494 and asked Florence for passage through its lands he made his request in Latin, and received Florentine consent in it. But when the more precariously-placed Maximilian, two years later, asked for Florentine help, he wisely did so in *toscano*, which the *Signoria* was no doubt pleased to use for its favourable reply.[61]

Theoretically, the centre of authority for both Latin and Italy had for centuries been Rome. But Florence was rising. The medieval relationship between the two cities has been slow in becoming clear. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when scientific history began, Italian unification was on the move, led by enlightened Piedmont while Pius IX spat spiritual fire from his ever-diminishing enclave. Oligarchic Europe found in Renaissance Florence its favourite ancestor. It was good, popes bad (that statues of Dante went up all over Italy was not just for his poetry). A century of reflection on post-Roman Italy, over the long term, has amended that view. It has become clear that without the papacy, the only people today to have heard of Florence would be archaeologists interested in small Roman towns. As it was, in 1500, Florentine supremacy in Tuscany was all but complete, for reasons most of which lie in the defiles of economic and political history. But the most fundamental reason, the necessary precondition, was that Florence had proved the best-placed and best-managed of all Tuscan towns to reap the decisive advantage their geography offered them for fruitful symbiosis with the ghost of the Roman Empire who lay to their south.

The basic symbiosis was political. For different motives, Florence and Rome shared an abhorrence for the very idea of imperial domination. Whence Guelfism. But the symbiosis went deeper, and cast Tuscan and papal powers as natural good neighbours (apart from two brief boundary flare-ups, in 1375 and 1478). *Pace* the

60. Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Vite de' uomini illustri del secolo xv*, ch. 5; ed. Paolo d'Ancona and Erhard Aeschelmann, Milan, Hoepli, 1951, p. 112. I thank Dr Oren Margolis for drawing my attention to this passage.

61. Both examples in B. Migliorini, *The Italian Language*, p. 162.

satirists, the popes were chronically short of money. It was not their prime interest. The papal states were chronically under-developed even into modern times; and in so far as they were "developed" at all in medieval times that was largely thanks to Tuscans, whose bursting cities bought grain and soldiers from papal territories, and whose job-hungry citizens found employment in papal territories as factors, managers, and – not least, in the fifteenth century – secretaries. Tuscans had run their own affairs on a different principle from Rome, that of ruthless competition. Its "creative destruction" had wiped some Tuscan cities from the map (c*f. Par.*, xvi, 75); but, true to form here too, it had made the winners rich. Florence was the main winner. When the pope's roof leaked he therefore borrowed money from the neighbours who had more than they knew what to do with (look at all that patronage). At the Council of Pisa in 1409 – essentially a Florentine council put in a newly-conquered city the victors hardly knew what to do with – the Medici first became papal bankers. Within a century, there were two Medici popes. The creditors, as is their way, had taken over the debtor's assets. We call it the Renaissance.

I exaggerate. I simplify, no doubt grossly. But that is only as a price for isolating, in the kaleidoscopic maze of Quattrocento history, a theme which runs consistently through it and explains its main drift. That includes the history of language. In 1417, the Council of Constance had put non-Italian papal revenues into the safe hands of northern national monarchies, called it "reform", elected as pope the most old-fashioned Roman they could find, and gone back to their own countries. The papacy of Martin V was thus left with the papal state and little else; except its old friends in Florence – nearest, and on the whole dearest, of the Italians who by 1500 were to fill most of the top-level papal posts; and also the readiest (since days of Bruni and Poggio early in the century), to teach the papacy its own language by providing it with the most accomplished Latin secretaries in Europe.

But now there was another language. Many more Florentines knew it than knew Latin. Like it or not, the popes too must learn it. Martin V was told this in no uncertain terms by a Florentine envoy in 1425. His opening apologia makes a striking contrast with that quoted earlier from the orator in Genoa in 1243:

> By custom, I know, it would be proper for me to address your Holiness in *grammatica*, with an elegance befitting the message which my Magnificent *Signoria* has entrusted to me. But this is not normal practice for other Florentine ambassadors. So it will be quicker and more effective, in better execution of the objectives of those who have appointed me, for me to speak in *volgare*.[62]

Etruria had had its revenge.

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62. B. Migliorini, *The Italian Language,* p. 161-162.